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ABSTRACT

The New England Resource Center for Higher Education has taken an interest in what colleges and universities are doing to address the needs of the "community within," an interest that began with the realization that many campuses achieved great success in outreach programs while ignoring the needs of low-paid employees of the colleges themselves. This paper discusses the concept of the "community within" and describes the background information gathered for a planned exploration of this topic. Simply defining the target as low-wage workers or lowest-paid college employees was not adequate, but defining it as workers paid an hourly wage opens the way for future studies. Many campuses do in fact offer programs to support the needs of the lower-income employees on campus, and these can be the basis for further study. The institution's human resources department can be a starting place, and is apt to offer the programs that are most relevant for the study. It is important, however, to go beyond the human resources benefit program model to think about how to help campuses institutionalize a commitment to serve their own communities as part of the civic engagement agenda. An such engagement effort must be carried out in an environment of respect. Pennsylvania State University is an institution that has successfully articulated its obligation to supporting staff and linked this with creative action and comprehensive programming. In spite of economic pressures on higher education, paying a living wage is absolutely critical to building a strong and sustainable community. As the Penn State example shows, it is not the only thing campuses can do to foster a caring and supporting environment in which respect is an institutional priority. (SLD)

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ED 482 378

Reversing the Telescope: Community Development from Within

Taking the First Look

Summer 2003

NERCHE's interest in what colleges and universities were doing to address the needs of the "community within" began with the recognition that while many campuses were achieving great success in community outreach programs by sending students/faculty/staff into the surrounding neighborhoods to feed the poor, mentor children, and support urban renewal efforts, many employees within institutions of higher education struggle in similar ways and are in need of comparable services and support. The commitment that campuses have made to civic engagement through service learning and community outreach programs is exemplary and has become a vital component of many of our campuses. However, to date, this commitment has not translated into practice to support the members of the internal campus community. With the support from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, NERCHE set out to develop this concept of the "communities within" and focus on new ways to support community development from within our own campuses.

We started with generalized concept and then began to canvas the current landscape of the "community within" idea, to locate policies and programs. Two research questions guided our work.

- How do we talk about this idea? What is the appropriate language and how do we communicate our thinking so that others can clearly understand our intentions?

- What are some current programs that might qualify as serving the needs of the "community within"? What are the history, affiliation, and oversight of these programs?

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Language

What do we call this? Reactions to this project depended upon the words used to describe the "community within" concept, and the audience. In the process of doing background research, it was useful to "try on" different language in order to get to the heart of the conversation in ways that would be effective in the future. In addition, the language that different constituents used to define the "community within" ideal offered a new way to shape, think, and frame the project focus.

Defining "The Community Within"

In the process of looking for campus examples, it became clear that reaching a consensus about whom exactly the "community within" included was problematic in itself. Our original intention was to look at the lowest-paid members of the campus -- those who clean the classrooms, prepare the food, manicure the grounds, and process the paperwork. Some respondents assumed that the lowest-paid employees included the growing cadre of underpaid adjunct professors as part of the "community within" framework. Undergraduates and graduate students alike assumed that their needs as unpaid and/or low-paid students were those slated to be addressed by the "community within" project. Community service coordinators struggled to grasp the "in here" framework in comparison to their "out there" focus. It was rare that the custodians and dining service staff came to mind as the benefactors of services. In this way, it became clear that we needed to define as clearly as possible, and with examples, exactly how we define our intended "community within" group.

Simply defining our target as "low-wage workers" or the "lowest-paid members of the campus staff" was not enough. Without a more quantifiable definition, people are quick to put their own framework and experience into defining "low-wage". Lawrence Katz, in his recent work with low-wage workers at Harvard University, suggests that low-wage workers at any institution can be broken into three categories: parking and security staff, janitorial and facility staff, and dining services staff. Though he recognizes that there are other low-paid employees who are staffed in secretarial, administrative, and laboratory positions, he concentrates his work on those staff (not

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student) employees who are paid on an hourly basis, not by stipend or annual salary (Katz interview, 3/17/03). By identifying our target "community" in a similar way and defining it as those who are paid on an hourly basis, we can better communicate our intentions for work in the future.

Defining the Idea Itself

We needed to find descriptive terms in order to do a literature review on this topic. We began by looking for examples of "campus-based service projects," "campus community building", and "living wage employee programs." Though these terms were not helpful in identifying a research-based literature to inform the project, they did provide a base of vocabulary to describe it.

A posting to the service-learning list-serv (www.servicelearning.org) by Lori Walters-Kramer at the University of Rochester suggested that "intra-campus service learning" is a term that might be recognized within the community service professional sphere. Unfortunately, however, her pleas for examples of such "intra-campus service programs" rendered only the suggestion of a student-maintained nature trail for recreational and academic purposes at Northwest Vista College (Carl H. Rush, listserv posting 2/24/03) and a smoking cessation program at a teaching hospital hosted by the American Association of Community Colleges' Bridges to Healthy Communities program (Sarena Pinto, listserv posting 2/25/03), neither of which exactly fit our proposed program model. Though intra-campus service learning fits the description of our intentions, it is not a term that is widely known or understood by those in the service-learning field.

Semantic Help From The Business Sector

Though our aim is to work with institutions of higher education to shape community development from within, the concept is not limited to the academic arena and is often best modeled in language and practice from the for-profit sector. The Corporate Social Responsibility Report, published by *Business Ethics Magazine,* highlights annually corporate citizens who recognize their employees not only as

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workers, but also as corporate citizens. Corporate publications speak of "worker education programs," "work-life balance," "workforce development" and "employee assistance benefits." They highlight the advantages of providing worker assistance based on the company's product , such as offering discounted merchandise if they are a clothing manufacturer, free fitness memberships if they are in the health business, or cheap legal assistance if they provide legal counsel. Though the terminology is more programmatic than theoretic, their philosophy for employee assistance and their attempts to define the programs and their rationale provide a new way of thinking about language and research on this topic.

Language matters. As we move forward in this project, it will be critical that we pay close attention to the words that we use and the ways in which we describe our intended goals. Since there seems to be very little written on this variation of campus public service and no consensus on what "intra-campus service learning" actually is, we need to be very aware that we are creating not only a new way of thinking, but a new way of talking about civic engagement and community service. In fostering this new dialogue, we should rely on examples and particular models of the ideal rather than broad assertions and theoretical conceptions. We need to work with key stakeholders to find vocabulary that complements the existing language while at the same time broadens the current notions of public service and community engagement on our campuses.

Program Models

Many campuses do, in fact, offer programs that support the needs of the lower-income employees on campus. Though these offerings are not usually intended to target this population specifically and not normally referred to as serving the "community within" in the true sense of our vision, many members of the low-wage staff take advantage of and greatly benefited from the programs. Looking more specifically at these programs, we can begin to think creatively about future programmatic models and can assess the essential components that make programs both viable and effective. In addition, we can begin to break down our initial conceptual idea into tangible units to

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better define exactly what it is that we hope to do in our "community within" project and what direction to take it to tackle its next phase.

Human Resources As a Starting Place

Unlike the many public service initiatives that are offered through the Student Activities/ Community Outreach/ Service Learning Offices, similar programs that benefit college employees tend to be offered through the human resources department. This is an important distinction. The HR department is well suited to institute policies and programs that meet the current needs of the employee population because they have the best sense on what these needs might be. Privy to confidential compensation information, the HR department is able to target those on campus who are truly the lowest-paid employees. They are also the department that administers benefits such as work/vacation schedules, health and dental insurance and Employee Assistance Programs, which can provide valuable insight on the current concerns of individuals on staff. An important voice in setting the standards for fair and equitable compensation for employees on campus, the HR is a key player in salary decisions that impact how well employees can afford the daily demands of life in the surrounding community.

Pitfalls of the HR Connection

Unfortunately, however, the human resources office is one with little direct contact with students, student affairs staff, and faculty, who are traditionally the leaders in public service projects out in the community. It is also an office with conflicting motives where fiscal concerns may override priorities in civic engagement and intra-campus community development. Often seen as disconnected from the philosophical mission of the institution, the human resources office sees itself as offering "benefits" rather than "public service programming" to the community of employees.

Relevant HR Benefits/Programs

When scanning the landscape to find current programs that embody the spirit of the "community within" project, we often found the HR programs to be most relevant. Concentrated on issues of literacy, housing, childcare, or mentoring, these benefits are

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likely listed on a campus HR website and are organized and facilitated by HR staff. Programs such as the *Bridge to Learning & Literacy Program* at Harvard University offers ESL, GED prep, and computer training to hourly employees twice a week during work hours. The University of Hawaii's *Blue Collar Supervisory Leadership Development Program* offers management and supervision training programs to those in the bottom rungs of their profession. Middlebury College offers employee-mentoring programs, which partner employees with role models in hopes that the relationship fosters professional growth and personal development. Even though these programs, initiated from the HR team, are viewed as "benefits" rather than opportunities for civic engagement and community development, they can support campus employees in significant ways.

For the most part, institutions point to specific aspects of the standard benefit package available to all employees as ways that they support members of the lowest-paid cohort. Despite the deep commitment to urban renewal efforts in their neighborhood, Trinity College can only speak of their generous retirement plan, tuition remission programs, reduced personal insurance rates, and free access to art and fitness facilities as ways that they support the low-wage workers on their campus (email from Joe Barker, 3/18/03). Similarly, Salem State advertises certain fringe benefits such as free membership into a credit union, sliding-scale child care, a dependent care assistance program, and reduced flu shots to assist hourly employees on their campus (www.salemstate.edu). Only rarely do they advertise specific efforts linked to community renewal. Yale University has recently embarked on a new venture to offer low-interest rates to faculty and staff who buy property within a certain radius of campus, in hopes of not only revitalizing the surrounding area, but to also support faculty and staff in their home purchase (Lewin, New York Times, 3/12/03, p. A6).

While these programs can be comprehensive and potentially helpful to those in low-paying positions, these benefits are not always advertised in ways that are convenient and appropriate for workers without computers and with little knowledge of the larger institutional framework in their job sites. For example, a casual poll of hourly

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employees on the UMASS Boston campus suggested that the mail delivery personnel and dining staff did not know how to access or receive information related to their employment, beyond asking their immediate supervisor (Interview with Lopez, Queen, and Pimental, 3/03).

Though many of these programs have secondary effects of supporting those in need, most began as an HR solution to a growing problem for the institution rather than from a committed concern for the employees (Interview with Ken Reardon, Cornell University, 4/03). Certainly there are programs that are created out of a leadership vision, student demonstration, or as a tie-in to an academic program/department, but these tend to be rare and much less formalized than the ones coordinated by the human resource office in response to a growing personnel problem. Most campus administrators wouldn't publicly admit this, but one could surmise that childcare/eldercare options would be introduced only when there is a growing problem with missed days at work for caregivers of dependents. Similarly, having more literate English speakers in positions in the residences and dining halls ensures that the needs of students are met in an efficient and timely manner, guaranteeing a more comfortable existence for the paying consumers.

An Institutional Commitment – Laying the Groundwork

In June 2003, NERCHE convened scholar-activists and students—one of whom was also employed by a campus facilities department—to further define the language of this project, to identify who we need to involve as entities with leverage in higher education, to foster collaborations, and to identify best practices. A variety of ideas for laying the groundwork to support the community within emerged from the conversation.

For our "community within" project to truly support the lowest-paid members of an institution in the same spirit as other community outreach programs, we need to step beyond the HR benefit program model and think about how to help campuses institutionalize their commitment to serve their own communities as part of their civic

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engagement agenda. We need to find ways to broaden the scope of the HR benefit program so that more voices are included in the conversation and a commitment to care for each other is shared by all. When caring for the needs of low-wage workers is an institutional priority, rather than an HR mandate, we can say that a campus has effectively served their "community within."

Colleges and universities can send powerful messages to the "community within" in hiring a diverse faculty and staff especially at the upper-level. A Caribbean background, for example, can signal that a dean or department chair has some cultural understanding of workers from similar origins, though an ascriptive commonality is insufficient on its own. Such an administrator would also need to demonstrate a commitment to the well being of those workers by developing a receptive climate. We found a working example of this at a university where an African American dean had created a community in which a janitorial worker, threatened with job loss, was able to ask the dean directly for support. The dean subsequently rallied members of the college to come to the worker's aid and, ultimately, preserved his job.

Campaigns for a living wage are taking place with increasing frequency on the nation's campuses and are finding support among certain groups of faculty, students, and staff. Actions involving labor issues may bring to light what institutions are failing to do to protect the interests of their workers. While it is essential that institutions be aware of the circumstances of lower-rung workers, such disputes can have a polarizing effect on a campus, and are best pursued with clarity about the intended and unintended outcomes.

Academic approaches to fostering engagement with the internal community locate this civic intention within the educational mission of the institution. For example, in geographic areas where low-wage workers are overwhelmingly Latino, Latino studies programs or institutes can undertake research that examines work and life issues of this population. Colleges and universities nationwide similarly can incorporate the demographics of campus workers and advance scholarship in the service of equity.

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Institutions interested in collecting data about low-wage workers on their campuses can access any number of national and local organizations that have either made this population their focus or that gather information relevant to the group. Among the suggestions were:

- UCLA Labor Center
- Center for Third World Organizing, Oakland; CA
- Student Labor Action Project (SLAP).
- United for a Fair Economy, Boston
- Global Working Families Project, Harvard University
- Labor centers, sustainability and environmental justice programs, and committees on the quality of life on campuses
- Educational networks, K-12 partnerships
- Schools of education and nursing
- Representatives from business who have spearheaded progressive programs for low-wage workers
- Departments that deal with foreign policy and/or immigration policy and labor rights
- *Dollars & Sense* magazine
- *Fast Company* magazine
- Local organizations that work with immigrant populations
- Students who come from low-income families
- Labor representatives on boards of trustees

Any successful community engagement effort must be carried out in an environment of respect, which is formed at the level of human relationships. Relationships formed between workers and students can be especially potent. At the Massachusetts College of Arts, students are introduced at orientation to the people who will be cleaning their residence halls. That the workers are paid for their participation in the orientation is noteworthy. With this simple action—putting names to faces that may have otherwise remained anonymous—the college sets a tone of regard for the dignity

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of all members of the campus. Emerson College's English Exchange with Emerson Employees brings students and low-wage employees together for weekly dialogues. During the 2002-03 school year, 12 students and 10 employees participated in the program, and a grant form Campus Compact, won by a student, provided funds to expand the program throughout the campus.

A disturbing issue raised in the discussion was that many low-wage workers on campuses are employed by subcontractors, rather than employed by the institution itself. Colleges and universities make investments, such as job training and tuition remission, in their permanent staff over contract workers, who are truly second- and third-class citizens. While it makes economic sense to see that low-wage workers are motivated to perform their duties in a satisfactory way, the larger issues regarding institutional responsibility to these community embers will not be easily resolved.

A Model of Engagement

Pennsylvania State University is one model to reference as we seek to help campuses think about institutionalizing a commitment to providing for the "community within." Committed to viewing all staff, regardless of income, as the university's most valuable resource, it is a community that has successfully articulated their obligation to supporting staff and linked this dedication creative action and comprehensive programming.

This commitment is voiced—not just from an office of community service or a center charged with a specific mandate—but from the president himself.

> "We are fortunate to have a highly dedicated workforce, willing to make an extra effort on behalf of the university, a commitment that is essential to Penn State's quality and success. At the same time, we have made an institutional commitment to address the important challenges of children, youth, and families in our society, an academic initiative that would be highly ironic were we not to be sensitive to the family needs of Penn's employees."
>
> -- Graham Spanier (President, Pennsylvania State University)

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There are myriad initiatives operating from many different levels that support this commitment at Penn State. Beyond the standard fare of benefit programs administered by the HR department, the university created the "Quality of Worklife" office, a result of the "Weekly-Paid Staff Assembly" suggestion, which is responsible for keeping the pulse on the current needs of the staff community. The office recently implemented a flexible workday model, emergency daycare services, forums for handling school strikes, and a mentoring program for low-wage women staff members. Similarly, the Community Outreach and Urban Renewal Group at Penn State, has agreed to subsidize any home purchase within 15 miles of campus for those full-time staff who have a annual income of less than $30,000. In addition, the Office of Community Outreach has worked with student organizations to provide targeted programs to meet the needs of low-income staff. Recent programs include a fully student-staffed homework center for the children of staff members, a mentoring program between students at the university and teenage children of staff members, and a "Lend a Hand" program which pairs able-bodied students with staff members to provide free house painting and carpentry, and to perform other household tasks. Penn State's creative and effective approaches clearly demonstrate the depth of its commitment to the needs of low-wage staff.

Shared Fates

Perhaps one of the most menacing developments looming on the horizon for low-wage workers on campus is the plight of public higher education, which is being slowly decimated by strained state budgets. Traditionally, public higher education has been the access point for economic and social mobility for low-wage earners and their children. As public support dwindles, so do viable opportunities for these populations to escape poverty and social isolation. So, in a sense, a focus on the "community within" is a reaffirmation of one of the central components of public education's mission. For leaders in public higher education to take a firm, united position on issues of access and equity can enable all members of the internal campus community—much in need of a galvanizing moment in these dispiriting times—to see that their work stands for something larger than the bottom line. In addition, by presenting a clear and consistent

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message to external constituents, public institutions are more likely to be heard than if they lobby individually for the needs of specific campuses.

Conclusion

Many might argue that the best thing that a college or university can do to support its "community within" is to pay a living wage and thus ensure the economic livelihood of their employees. Paying a living wage is absolutely critical to building a strong and sustainable community. However, as the Penn State example demonstrates, it is not the only thing that campuses can do to foster a caring and supporting environment in which respect for each other is an institutional priority.

As we move forward in our work with the "community within" project, it will be important for us to remember that we are asking campuses to re-shape the way in which they currently view their commitment to social responsibility and civic engagement. In this shift towards greater intra-campus awareness, new language will evolve and new service-learning philosophies will be embraced. We will strive to build healthier communities not from the outside- in, but rather from the inside out.

Despite the few examples cited, this is a relatively untapped subject, with room for great exploration and further discussion. Very little research has touched upon the importance of building community from within, nor are there many campuses that seem to have truly incorporated the spirit of this project into their institutional priority. This is a project with powerful potential for campuses in the country, and can serve as an excellent model for future community development projects. Bringing key stakeholders from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds together to think more specifically about motivating campuses to re-think their commitment to community building and civic engagement seems a logical next step in this national conversation.

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